

# **UNIVERSITY OF HARTFORD**

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**Testimony of Marcia Hughes, PhD**  
**Research and Evaluation Analyst**  
**Center for Social Research, University of Hartford**  
**200 Bloomfield Avenue**  
**West Hartford, CT 06117**  
**[mhughes@hartford.edu](mailto:mhughes@hartford.edu)**  
**860-768-5699**

**Prepared for the Appropriations Committee Public Hearing re Governor's Proposed FY 2017-2018 Budget: February 21, 2017**

My name is Marcia Hughes and I work at the Center for Social Research at the University of Hartford. I am here to speak on behalf of the *Help Me Grow* Program, administered by the Office of Early Childhood working in collaboration with The Child Development Infoline (CDI), a specialized unit of the United Way of Connecticut/211. As many of you know, *Help Me Grow* is a system for identifying as early as possible, children at risk for poor developmental and behavioral outcomes and linking them and their families to community-based programs and services. *Help Me Grow* is accessed through a statewide toll free number at the Child Development Infoline.

Young children with behavioral and developmental problems and their families often have multiple needs (Hair et al., 2006; Neely-Barnes and Dia, 2008). However, service delivery and interventions often focus on single problems and operate in isolation from each other. Families have problems understanding the roles of the different agencies and ultimately are confused about what services are available and become frustrated trying to access them (King, Cathers, King, and Rosenbaum, 2001; Sloper and Beresford, 2006). Many times their needs are not adequately addressed (Halfon, Duplessis, and Inkelas, 2007).

Since the inception of *Help Me Grow*, first as a pilot program in Hartford in 1997, then as a statewide initiative in 2002, and now a national model (<http://www.helpmegrownational.org>), thousands of parents in CT needing help with their child have called *Help Me Grow*. When parents call *Help Me Grow*, the phone is answered by one of six care coordinators who have a broad knowledge base of child development issues, available resources and services, agency and professional roles, and where to find information. The role of the care coordinator is to help families navigate service systems and connect them to needed program resources. They collaborate with a range of professionals across service sectors and ensure that access to and delivery of service from different agencies is coordinated. They provide parents with information on where to call, who to speak to, what questions to ask and when necessary will assist with completing application packages.

In 2012 the Center for Social Research recruited families who called *Help Me Grow* to participate in a phone interview (Hughes, Joslyn, Wojton, O'Reilly, & Dworkin, 2016). We evaluated the effect of *Help Me Grow* on child progress and family functioning (based on a Protective Factors Framework, see Center for the Study of Social Policy Web site, <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengtheningfamilies>). Findings demonstrated that HMG support to families and connection to programs and services enhanced protective factors even among families with differing needs. Overall, the parents we spoke with had a better understanding of service systems and programs and how to access them and had more knowledge of their child's development. As a result, family circumstances and parent-child relationships improved as in many cases did the child's behavior, and parents felt better able to cope with their situation. Some parents needed help with complex issues or problems while others needed practical information or guidance on their child's development. Many families reported on the benefits of being connected to services such as the Ages & Stages Child Developmental Monitoring Program, and to support groups with other parents of children with similar needs. Families who called under stress, sometimes in crisis, were able to gain access to necessary help. By enhancing child and parenting behaviors and patterns of family interactions, there are long-term, cumulative protective effects on the child's developmental trajectory.

The value of *Help Me Grow* as an effective and efficient model for supporting families and programs was recently recognized at the national level. Specifically, Connecticut's Office of Early Childhood and *Help Me Grow* is spotlighted in a joint statement from the US Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, the purpose of which is to promote partnership, collaboration, and coordination between services for early childhood programs (January 19, 2017, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/earlylearning/files/ed-hhs-miechv-partc-guidance.pdf>).

In sum, given 1) the need for *Help Me Grow*, 2) the evidence of short and long term positive impact that *Help Me Grow* has on children's healthy development and family well-being, and 3) the establishment of *Help Me Grow* as a means for effectively facilitating collaboration and coordination across early childhood programs and service sectors, I respectfully state that removing funds for *Help Me Grow* is misguided and urgently request that you support keeping it in the State budget.

Please feel free to contact me if there are any questions. Thank you.